

SIGNIFICANT SPEECHES AND EVENTS

Closing Address by the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Tan Sri Dato Hj Muhyiddin Haji Mohd Yassin at the Global Movement of Moderates Conference (Kuala Lumpur, 19 January 2012)

Allow me to briefly mention at the outset the historical context in which contemporary discourse about moderation and the moderates emerged. As we know, at the end of the Cold War, many people thought that the war between communism and the West was about to be replaced by a war between the West and Muslims. The Gulf War, the Bosnian conflict, the World Trade Center bombing and the growing influence of Islamist movements in the Middle East, Turkey, Central Asia and across the Muslim world gave an impression that there lies an Islamic threat against the West.

Throughout the 1990s, Samuel P. Huntington's seminal work, *Clash of Civilizations*, generated much interest in academia as well as in the media. It seemed that confrontations drawn along the fault lines of ideology and religion were inevitable. In particular, the prophecy of an imminent conflict between two great civilisations, namely Islam and the Christian West, sent tremors across the world.

It was rather unfortunate that the tragic event on September 11, 2001, accentuated the images of conflict between Islam and the West. Eventually, the post 9/11 world was marked by growing Islamophobia in the West and across the world. From Osama bin Laden to the Taliban in Afghanistan, the vision of militant Islam as a threat to the West has gripped the imagination of Western governments and the media.

For more than a decade, the image of Islam as the religion of peace and moderation was hijacked by violent aggressions by militant Muslims and their network of terror. The events in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kashmir and other parts of the world where Muslim minorities are struggling for self-determination, reinforced the image of Islam as a religion that is prone to fanaticism, extremism and warfare. On the other hand, the global war on terror led by Western superpowers has pitted the West against the Muslims on a scale that has never been felt before.

Without us realising it, the instability of this war afflicted regions in some parts of the Muslim world, and the growing fear of terrorism fuelled by Islamophobia in the West overshadowed the voices of moderation, peace and harmony within Islam. People tend to ignore the fact that the phenomenon of extremism, fanaticism and militancy in the Muslim world is confined to only small groups of people usually alienated from the mainstream tradition of Islamic moderation.

The Concept of Moderation in Islam

The virtue of moderation was expounded in Islam by a key verse in the Qur'ān which describes Muslims as an *ummah* or community justly balanced. Allah Almighty says in the Qur'ān:

Thus have We made you an *ummah* justly balanced That you might be witnesses over the nations and the Messenger be witness over yourselves (2:143).

From this verse, Muslim scholars define *ummat^{an} wasat^{an}*, or justly balanced *ummah*, as the primary characteristic of an Islamic community as willed by Allah Almighty Himself. In this context, classical Muslim scholars agreed that being *ummah* justly balanced means essentially possessing a combination of interconnected attributes of justice, goodness, avoidance of extreme laxity or extravagance and being in the middle position.

Apart from this, the Qur'ān also emphasises the role of Islam as the harbinger of mercy and compassion to all mankind. Allah says in the Qur'ān:

We sent thee not, but as a mercy for all creatures (21:107).

With this understanding of Islamic moderation and the message of mercy and compassion that Islam spreads to mankind, many contemporary Muslim scholars and leaders condemned acts of terror perpetuated in the name of religion. Militant radicalism and religious extremism contradict the very essence of Islam as the religion that promotes the virtue of moderation and peaceful co-existence between peoples of different faiths, creed and colour.

For Muslims, religious and cultural differences should not be the root cause of hatred and enmity, as the Qur'ān itself accords spiritual recognition to social plurality and cultural heterogeneity which is part of human nature. Allah says in the Qur'ān:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things) (49:13).

The Necessity of Moderation

Apart from religious injunctions, the political, social and economic realities that we are facing today necessitate the practice of moderation. On the economic front, Western countries are major trading partners of the Muslim world. As much as the West depends on Muslim countries for natural resources, Muslim countries rely on the economic prosperity of the West as major importers of goods and services to accelerate the process of economic development at home. As we know, for decades

the peaceful, prosperous and developed West created millions of jobs and countless economic opportunities for Muslims in their respective countries. It would be folly for Muslims to believe that the economic and political destruction of the West will bring economic prosperity and political stability to the Muslim world.

At the same time, the growing population of Muslims in the West has changed the social and cultural demography of Western society. For instance, in Europe today, a key debate is about how to integrate and assimilate new Muslim populations into the European society without necessarily eroding European cultures, traditions and identity. No doubt, the success of this process of integration and assimilation will have far-reaching consequences on the lasting peace and stability of European countries.

As Muslims are making inroads into the West, bringing together their values and social practices into the fabric of Western societies, the social and political values of the West are also increasingly being embraced by Muslims. The values of human rights, freedom and liberty, which were once associated with the West, now form part and parcel of the life of Muslims. It is not uncommon now to find Islamic groups and Muslim-based political parties together with civil society movements participating in democratic processes and clamouring for democratic reform. The political transformation currently underway in Muslim countries shows that the value of democracy can sit easily with the value of moderation, justice and compassion in Islam.

The political, social and cultural interactions between the Muslim world and the West, which is now being reinforced by the forces of globalisation, bring about new perspectives on the relationship between Islam and the West. For Muslims, the classical demarcation line that separates *dār al-islām* (the realm of Islam) from *dār al-ḥarb* (the realm of war) has now become obsolete. It is not proper for Muslims to regard the West as enemies when the cultural and social demography of the West itself is undergoing tremendous change as a result of its rising Muslim populations. Likewise, it is no longer fitting for the West to regard Islam as the new fascism which poses an imminent threat to the security of its nations and the future of its civilisation. The truth is, the Muslims themselves are becoming more familiar with and receptive to the good values of Western civilisation.

The future path of global peace and prosperity must be built upon mutual understanding and respect between communities which represent the major world civilisations. Be it Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism and other major world civilisations, all must work for the perpetuation of peaceful coexistence between people of different religions and cultures. This necessitates a shift in our perspective from the clash of civilisations to civilisational engagement. In this particular context, the practice of moderation and the rejection of extremism is the key to civilisational engagement and global peace. Only by rejecting extremism and embracing moderation will we be able to treat others with dignity, accept

our differences and live with each other in peace and harmony. In today's world, moderation is not an option, but a must.

Moderation in Other Faiths

We are fortunate that all major religions and civilisations advocate moderation as a way of life. Christianity and Confucianism abhor extravagance and opulence which symbolise an extreme behaviour in the conduct of one's life. Likewise, in Hinduism, the concept of the middle path that calls for divine centred living without renouncing the world is considered the best means to achieve salvation. In the same vein, Buddhism advocates the Middle Way between all extremes by avoiding fanaticism and laziness in the journey to Nirvana.

If we can see the nature of religion through the prism of moderation, we will be able to identify common values shared by all religions. The values are peace, harmony and true happiness which will materialise when the followers of every religion avoid excessiveness in religious practices and in the conduct of worldly life. I believe if everybody can nurture the spirit of moderation, which implies rejection of excessiveness and extremism, there will be no harm done to humankind in the name of religion or ideology.

At the same time, we need to address the root cause of extremism and fanaticism which often lead to hatred and enmity between people of different religions and cultures, namely economic alienation, political exclusion and social deprivation. We need to replace economic alienation with equitable distribution of wealth; we need to end political exclusion by promoting political inclusiveness; we need to eliminate social deprivation by upholding social justice and respect for human dignity. We believe that the seeds of goodness will only bear fruit when the root causes of evil are completely annihilated.

Moderation in Malaysia

Ladies and gentlemen,

Moderation has been the pillar of Malaysia's success in dealing with ethnic and religious diversity. Being part of the Malay world where great civilisations meet, Malaysia has been blessed with peace and prosperity that is built upon mutual understanding and respect among its multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. Despite being a plural society from the start, we thank Almighty God that we have so far been successful in maintaining peace and averting conflict by promoting moderation as a national culture.

We promote moderation through active involvement of the government and civil society in educating the people about the values of moderation and peace. The

government working together with religious communities and the civil society have been actively promoting religious harmony as a main pillar of national unity. A Committee on Inter-Religious Harmony was formed with a view to promote common values shared by all religions as a means to encourage mutual understanding, respect and cooperation between different religious communities. I must say that our success as a nation depends on the willingness of the moderates from all religions and cultures to set aside differences and work for a common goal in perpetuating peace, harmony and prosperity for our people.

It is my great pleasure today in conjunction with this conference to launch an important work on Islamic moderation as it is envisioned and practiced in Malaysia and the Malay world. Professor Tan Sri Mohd Kamal Hassan, a renowned professor of Islamic studies from the International Islamic University Malaysia, has come up with a great book entitled *Voice of Islamic Moderation from the Malay World*, which compiles evidence from the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions which extol the essence of Islam as the religion of moderation. There are also numerous empirical examples which epitomise moderation as the foundation of peace, harmony and stability in the Malay world in general and in Malaysia in particular.

I am glad to quote a passage in Tan Sri Mohd Kamal Hassan's book which is of great interest to me:

The voice of Islamic moderation coming from contemporary Malaysia is a reflection of the Malaysian milieu in which Islamic thought has been nurtured in a multi-ethnic society in which Muslims, though in the majority, have lived and co-existed with non-Muslims of various ethnic and religious groups in peace and harmony. [...] This democratic setup has moulded a national culture which makes political or religious extremism unpopular and uncalled for. The winning formula for all communities has always been one in which there is a realistic recognition of the pluralistic nature of the nation and the need to balance between the particular interest of a community and the larger interest of national stability, national security and national wellbeing, without stepping beyond the limits of freedom as provided for in the Constitution of the nation.

I believe the value of moderation will continue to provide lasting peace, harmony and stability for Malaysia and for the world community. This requires the coalition of the willing among the moderates of the world to persistently promote moderation as a global value. I do hope that this international conference, the idea of which was mooted by Malaysian Prime Minister, the Honourable Dato' Seri Mohd. Najib Tun Abdul Razak, and the actions that will follow from it will provide avenues for the moderates from all major civilisations of the world to work hand in hand in the promotion of just and lasting peace for the well-being of the global community.

Thank you.